

DELIUS SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

NEWSLETTER  
of the  
DELIUS SOCIETY

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## EDITORIAL

A large part of this issue is devoted to the press notices following the three performances of "Koanga" given in London last May. It may well be that readers of the Newsletter are getting a little tired of seeing so much space given to the operas, sometimes regarded as the least successful of Delius' compositions. Partly for this reason, I have included as a contrast, criticisms of the two recordings of "A Mass of Life" at present available, both of which raise points of great interest. Professor Mellars' contribution is characteristically penetrating and I have included the whole of it because his remarks on Delius depend in part on the contrast that has been drawn with Bruckner (those who dislike Bruckner should pass over paragraphs two and three) and the view he expresses at the end is sufficiently illuminating even to justify the use of such appalling words as 'prelapsarian' and 'Edenic'. I would not say that I agreed with some of his strictures: it is easy to speak of 'moments of flagging inspiration' or 'papering over the cracks' (of how many composers have these remarks been made) but unless specific references are given, such observations have little significance. I am most grateful to our member, Mr. H. A. Dennis, for sending in this article.

Mr. Henahan brings us to a very important question at the commencement of his article: the reason for the neglect of "A Mass of Life". Despite the championship of the Delius Trust in sponsoring performances and recordings, "A Mass of Life" has yet to find a permanent place in the concert repertory, and much the same could be said, even now, for "Sea Drift", "Songs of Sunset", "The Song of the High Hills", "An Arabesque" and many others.

In this situation it is all the more surprising that so much attention is being paid to the operas. Much of our gratitude must go to our friends, the Delius enthusiasts of the United States, and in particular to Mr. Frank Corsaro, Mr. Paul Callaway and all the very talented team of the Opera Society of Washington, for showing us how much is to be gained by the revival of these works. One circumstance in particular strikes me, whatever may be said for, or against, the Delius operas. In the Centenary performances of "A Village Romeo & Juliet" in London, of "Koanga" and "A Village Romeo & Juliet" in Washington, and again of "Koanga" in London last May, each performance was given to an enthusiastic capacity audience. Of how many neglected composers and operas could the same be said? And this was achieved without any of the pulling power of famous 'international' conductors and performers. That the future of the Delius operas is still an open question is a tribute in itself to the enduring power of the music.

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Copies of the Catalogue of the 'Delius in America' Exhibition at the Camden Festival, are still available and can be obtained by application to the Editor, enclosing a remittance of 8p.

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Contributions to the Newsletter, and any correspondence in connection with its contents, should be sent to the Editor, 19 Maple Avenue, Maidstone, Kent.

### FORTHCOMING EVENTS

- Wednesday, 21st March, 1973      Holborn Library at 7.30 p.m.  
Piano recital by Robert Threlfall - "Delius and his friends".
- April 3rd, 4th, 5th and 7th, 1973.      At the Kennedy Center, Washington D.C. the Choral Arts Society & National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antal Dorati will give performances of "Sea Drift".
- April 23rd, 1973.      At the Philadelphia Academy of Music, the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, The Pennsylvania Orchestra conducted by Robert Page, will perform "Songs of Farewell" and three a cappella choruses by Delius, "A Survivor from Warsaw" by Schoenberg and "Belshazzar's Feast" by Walton.
- (Please see the final page of this issue for further details of the Concert).

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New Statesman - 29th January, 1971.

### God or Mountains

by Wilfrid Mellers.

It's an interesting reflection that, in their finest moments, Bruckner and Delius have much in common: interesting because superficially it would seem that they are polar opposites, allied only in both being late romantics. Bruckner was, we're told, a simple soul, born into a rural community. A man of God, whose art was devoted to God's glory, he also, perhaps collaterally, had a deep respect for tradition and had no overt desire except to follow in the steps of the masters (especially Beethoven and Schubert). Delius, on the other hand, was a complex character, born into an industrial community, frequenting sophisticated circles in Paris. Animated by a fanatical dislike of God and of established musical traditions, he disapproved of almost all music except his own. Believing that fulfilment of self was the only valid goal, he was ruthless both morally and artistically in pursuit of it.

That this opposition is over-simple becomes evident as reflection deepens. If Bruckner was so unequivocally God-dedicated, why did he spend the greater part of his working life - after his apprentice years as a church musician - composing symphonies, since the sonata-symphony, far from incarnating a 'faith', is concerned with Becoming, with growth through conflict to hard-won resolution? How is it that Bruckner developed a reverence for the arch-egoist and sensualist Wagner no less obsessive than his worship of the classical masters? It rather seems that his greatness springs from the fact that he is a divine Fool: though one born into a rural, feudal, Catholic Society grown repressive and moribund, so that his vision of bliss is undermined by psychological disturbance. He discovers his paradise, and wonderful it is; but to reach it he needs the structural Becoming of sonata. As a religious-mystical composer he's thus closer to late Beethoven than he is to Bach; his adagios can sustain comparison with their model, the Adagio of Beethoven's Ninth - a work which Bruckner considered the ultimate height of human achievement.

Given all this, it isn't surprising that Bruckner conductors are born rather than made. To interpret him adequately calls for a rare synthesis of visionary innocence in the lyricism, epic grandeur in the structural proportions, and sensuous instability and stress in the chromaticism and enharmony. Bruno Walter wasn't as quintessentially a Bruckner conductor as he was a Mahler conductor; he's slightly too sweet or too frantic, missing the heroism. But there's more to any Walter performance of Viennese music than to most men's, so it's good to have a reissue of his performance of Bruckner's Fourth with the Columbia Symphony (CBS 611 37, 29s 10d): I've seldom heard the tremolando and horn calls of the famous opening sound more magical: only the complex architecture of the great finale seems lacking in monumentality and momentum.

Delius never wrote a symphony, dismissing the form as by his time obsolete, a refuge for withered academicians. He did compose a Mass: though of course it's a 'Mass of Life', setting Nietzsche's celebration of human potency, courage and endurance in face of the inescapable fact of mortality. It's Delius's biggest work and, partly for that reason, not his best. Whereas Bruckner started from submission to tradition and became profoundly original in extending it in ways that his immense melodies demanded, Delius, starting ab ovo from his own passions (which none the less sometimes implied identification with Wagner), could achieve fulfilment only so long as he was 'inspired'. Often he was - notably throughout 'Sea Drift' (in which he identifies with Whitman's childhood revelations of loss) and in 'Song of the High Hills' (where he's alone with Nature, and the wordless chorus yearns in pentatonic ecstasy for a bliss which the sensual chromatics would deny). In the Mass there are comparably marvellous moments (for instance the sublime Lento in Part II); but there are also passages in which, inspiration flagging, Delius becomes parasitic on the very academic, Teutonic-British, choral-symphonic tradition he held in contempt. Both at his best (because he's so waywardly personal) and at his worst (because he then needs help in papering over the cracks) Delius too demands a special kind of conductor, sensitive to the flexibility of the Delian line: for the sumptuous harmony depends, more than Wagner's on a flow of independent parts, always soaring, seeking some pre-harmonic, paradisaical wholeness, haleness and holiness.

This brings us to the common ground (or perhaps it's uncommon sky) between Delius and Bruckner. The vision they both see or hear, whether in cathedral or in mountainous solitude, is prelapsarian and Edenic. If that's their romanticism, it's also the quality that makes them universal; they're both boundless in their awareness of the cravings of the fallible human heart. Beecham's supreme gift as an interpreter of Delius was to reveal this supra-personal vision within a composer more idiosyncratic than most. His performance of the 'Mass of Life' with the RPO and London Philharmonic Chorus (CBS 611 82/3 29s 10d) comes up, in this dubbing, as freshly sonorous, tensely strong even when the music is most heart-breaking. None the less, grateful though one is for its reissue, there should be a new recording.\* Time passes, as Delius knew, and he's no longer an unfashionable composer; on the contrary his music appeals to today's young both in its distrust of Establishment and in its simultaneous rejection of materialism and of God.

(\*The new (stereo) recording, which has since been issued, is reviewed overleaf.)

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A Mass of Life  
Delius' important and lovely score in a welcome  
new recording from Angel

by Donal Henahan

Delius' 'A Mass of Life' is of course not a Mass in any traditional sense, no more than is his Requiem. In the album notes accompanying this welcome and generally quite splendid Angel release, the composer's onetime amanuensis, Eric Fenby, strongly suggests an ironical intent (".....I can imagine Delius' dry remarks on framing the title....."), though Fenby goes on to call the work "a choral celebration of the Will to say Yea ! to life". Perhaps this seemingly equivocal approach, which accurately reflects the text's Nietzschean contradictions and ambiguities (Delius drew his words from 'Thus Spake Zarathustra'), partly explains the neglect this important and exceptionally lovely score has suffered. Only the Beecham recording, made in 1952, ever has entered the catalogues, and live performances fall squarely in the hen's-tooth category. Musical and physical problems do exist of course; a score that calls for six horns, four trumpets, and double chorus with soloists presents more than ordinary obstructions. But more difficult pieces are regularly performed and recorded - think only of Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony with its ten horns, five clarinets, eight trumpets, and armies of singers. Then why such reluctance about 'A Mass of Life', Delius' most ambitious and in many ways his most satisfying work? The Nietzschean philosophy that permeates the score no doubt is partly responsible: Nordic Supermen dropped out of fashion in art some twenty-five years ago and have not really been back since. But people do listen to the 'Ring', despite Wagner's distressing philosophy, don't they? Could Delius be suffering - one raises the possibility with great diffidence - not because of any unattractiveness in the 'Mass' itself, but from the persistence of the Beecham legend?

Indeed, it must have taken some gumption on the part of Charles Groves and Angel to pitch into a fresh recording of this work. Even though the old Columbia (SL 197) mono recording has been unavailable in this country for years, the reissue in 1970 by British CBS gave any new version something extraordinarily difficult to match: major Delius. Beecham at his mature best, and sound that could hardly be better for its early-LP time. Sir Thomas did, after all, conduct the first performance, in 1909, and his recording should never be out of circulation. His reading of the 'Mass' is consistently more alive to subtleties of atmosphere and drama than that of Groves, and the tension of the sustained big line never leaves the Beecham performance, even though it is on the whole a broader and more leisurely conception; Actually, Groves goes his own way in the matter of tempos - faster in The Night Song, more deliberately in The Dance Song, for instance - and moves over the ground more quickly in the final portions, when interest is in danger of running down; exactly where Beecham, with his keen instinct in these matters, slows down and luxuriates over details. At Noon in the Meadows, heard through a mist that at times turns almost opaque, is quintessential Beecham and Delius.

But is there another Delius, one whom Beecham does not own in perpetuity? Charles Groves in this richly recorded version suggests there can be. His vocal soloists are on the whole more accurate and more in focus than Beecham's,

and they adopt a more intimate style that contrasts interestingly with some of the quasi-operatic singing heard from Charles Craig, Monica Sinclair, Rosina Raisbeck, and Bruce Boyce in the original. The most significant gain in the Angel version, however, is in cleaning up the orchestral and vocal picture so that one actually can hear Delius' score in proper balance.

For a telling instance of the new recording's virtues in this respect, listen to The Midnight Song, where the basses intone the portentous "O Mensch! Gib Acht! Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht!" while the contralto continues her nostalgic apostrophizing of Zarathustra. In Beecham, the solo voice rises as in an aria, and the chorus is so muffled that the text does not emerge. In Groves, both solo and choral parts come through, and the marvelous complexity of the passage can be heard. (An unreconstructed Beechamite of course could contend that Delius intended a muffled effect here, but it is undeniably fascinating to hear such interweaving detail in this composer's music, so often smothered under impressionist gauze by Beecham imitators.) Angel's soloists all make exceptionally pleasing sounds, and Benjamin Luxon brings to Zarathustra's musings both a wide-ranging baritone and much sensitivity to the text's nuances. (One hears that Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau had been scheduled as the baritone in both the Beecham and Groves recordings, but took sick each time).

So here is a major milestone in the Delius revival, done with love and care, sumptuously played and elegantly sung. Will it help give this exercise in music and philosophy some deserved circulation? If not, we may have to agree with Nietzsche that "philosophy is not suited for the masses. What they need is holiness". Delians may also hope that Columbia will be jogged into reissuing the Beecham performance in this country so that we may consult the Rosetta stone, if we wish.

DELIUS: A Mass of Life, Heather Harper, soprano; Helen Watts, contralto; Robert Tear, tenor; Benjamin Luxon, baritone, London Philharmonic Chorus and Orchestra, Charles Groves, cond. Angel SB 3781, \$11.96 (two discs).

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#### Midland Branch meeting, 10th November 1972.

Members gathered in Nottingham at the home of Peter and Margaret Trotman, who were as always welcoming and indulgent hosts, to hear an extremely interesting and thoughtfully illustrated talk on the painter Edvard Munch and his associations with Delius, given by Richard Kitching.

After briefly sketching Munch's early environment, he pointed the originality and historical maturity of the painter's work with excellent slides of 'The Sick Child', 'The Scream' and some examples from 'The Frieze of Life', among others. Munch's savage portrayal of the crises of living, his emotional figures and the symbolic tones of his treatment of women were seen alongside Scandinavian nature scenes and desolate sea scapes. The kinship of these last with the colours of much of Delius' work is a reminder of the mutual regard in which the two men held each other over a period of some thirty-eight years. They shared many friends, artists and musicians, had a common love of the northern landscape, and philosophical views attuned to the writings of Nietzsche and J. P. Jacobsen. Parts of

Fennimore and Gerda and Arabesque, based on Jacobsen's work, closely match the mood of Munch's lonely figures, as some brief excerpts underlined.

A summary of Munch's later life gave an opportunity to see one or two revealing self-portraits and also a glimpse of his more prosaic but talented commissioned work. In conclusion of a most enjoyable exposition, the Groves recording of Eventyr was heard in full.

E. E. Rowe.

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The Financial Times Thursday May 18, 1972 - Camden Festival

Koanga

by Andrew Porter.

Koanga, composed 1896-97, was first performed in German translation in Elberfeld, 1904, with Clarence Whitehill in the title-role. Beecham conducted three performances at Covent Garden in 1935 (Oda Slobodskaya, John Brownlee); and now there are three performances at Sadler's Wells Theatre as part of the Camden Festival. Interest in Delius's early opera was lately renewed by the extraordinary acclaim for the piece at its American premiere, in Washington two years ago. The Americans made us feel that all these years we had been neglecting something important. Not so, on the strength of what we saw and heard last night.

I went with hopes high. A Village Romeo and Juliet and Fennimore and Gerda had shown that Ernest Newman's conclusion after Koanga, that Delius had little talent for opera and a weak sense of theatre, might have been too hasty (after Don Carlos, had not Newman declared that Verdi was not really a dramatic composer?). All commentators agreed that Keary's libretto was lamentable; but perhaps in the music we would find something of that ecstatic vision which Delius first experienced when he heard Negro voices from the plantation, singing in chorus.

But, even after allowing for the fact that this was a weak, pretty colourless performance, Koanga seemed dull. The most attractive moment was the familiar La Calinda, especially effective in its solo and choral context. What should have been big dramatic moments, Koanga's curse or Palmyra's Liebestod, the finales of Acts 2 and 3, were musically undramatic. Delius's response to the characters and their situations is inadequate. Beecham says surprisingly little about Koanga in his book on the composer, but he does remark on "the absence of an underlying basis of emotional sincerity. The principal characters ... have an odd unreality that fails to command our complete sympathy and interest".

The action is set on a Louisiana plantation in the late 18th century. Koanga, the new slave, is a prince and voodoo priest. His master gives him as bride the beautiful Palmyra, a girl of his own tribe, hoping thereby to induce the proud chieftain to work. But Palmyra is also desired by the overseer, Perez; and moreover she is half-sister to the master's wife, Donna Clotilda. La Calinda is part of the wedding celebrations, interrupted when Perez abducts Palmyra. Koanga calls down his curse, and reinforces it in Act 3 with a voodoo ceremony deep in the forest. The plantation is



stricken. Koanga returns just as Perez is on the point of molesting Palmyra, and kills him; off-stage, he is killed himself; and then Palmyra, singing over his body, kills herself. The whole is framed in a prologue and epilogue for a bevy of young Southern ladies, and Uncle Joe, who tells them the tale.

Charles Groves, with the LSO, directed a prosaic and totally undramatic account of a score that needs all the help it can get: none of the poise, the delicate placing, the rhythmic finesse, the exquisite play of colours, by which Delius's music is brought to life. Douglas Craig's production was clumsy, and the anonymous lighting was careless. The principals of the Washington performance, Claudia Lindsey and Eugene Holmes, repeated their roles here. Miss Lindsey's high notes carry, but the lower passages fade; there was little personality in her singing. Mr. Holmes has a rather backward baritone, resonated to richness, effective when used at force, but inexpressive in mezza voce. Again, little feeling of character or personality was projected.

All in all, this Koanga was a disappointment. The opera could, of course, have been more persuasively presented.. Judgment - as opposed to the impressions left by last night's performance - had better wait upon study of the recording which has been promised. And of course Camden were right to put on a work which many people wanted to hear - even though not many of them may want to hear it again.

Evening News Thursday May 18, 1972. Sadlers Wells Theatre.

### Koanga

by H. J. Pankhurst.

It is 37 years since this rare Delius opera has been seen in London (that was a Beecham performance at Covent Garden) and this new production is more than a bit of history-making. It is an evening of splendid singing and music-making.

It also brought three distinguished debuts: the first British appearance of two fine American singers, Eugene Holmes and Claudia Lindsey, in the leading roles, and the first appearance in the pit at the Wells of the London Symphony Orchestra.

Conductor Charles Groves saw to it that the combination wrought the right kind of lyrical Delius magic.

The opera, inspired by a year Delius spent on a Florida plantation, tells of an African prince sold into slavery and his tragic love affair with a half-caste girl.

Eugene Holmes, with a rich tone and an easy, even power made Koanga a man of dignity and strength. Claudia Lindsey's Palmyra was a touching study, sung with warmth and feeling.

The Times, May 18th 1972 - Sadler's Wells Theatre.

### Koanga

by Alan Blyth.

Few, if any, operas at the Camden Festival have been lucky enough to have the kind of skilled, cogent presentation lavished on Koanga last night. With the LSO under Charles Groves in the pit, economic but evocative sets from Peter Rice, and Douglas Craig's well-pointed production,

Delius was done proud and as strong a case as possible made out for his third opera, given only once before in London, at Covent Garden in 1935. In consequence the work proved as eloquent, as noble, and as deeply felt as anything in the canon.

Although Koanga is far from being as individual as many of the later, orchestral works, traits of both Delius's musical style and thought can be heard clearly emerging out of the late Romantic mould in which they seem set. The voice of Palmyra rising distantly in the background as a counterpoint to Koanga's third-act solo and the long, sinuous postlude to the principals' death scene are both highly individual creations; and the whole of the voodoo scene has a powerful sense of that pantheism so beloved of Delius.

All these come in the last act, by far the longest and most substantial, written some time after the rest, but throughout the music exerts a strong sense of atmosphere and also of affinity with the down-trodden and suffering.

There is indeed only one moment of real happiness, when the captive Prince Koanga is promised as bride to the half-caste Palmyra as a way of making the rebellious Negro submissive.

The mood-painting is, then, predictably strong; the characterization and the delineation of specific relationships is less so. Koanga is certainly given a clear-cut personality. Palmyra is little more than a symbol. The evil ones set against them are mere ciphers.

Or so it seemed in this casting because Eugene Holmes in the title role, with his vibrant, high baritone (very reminiscent of George Shirley's tenor) and brooding presence, dominated the performance. Claudia Lindsey was a too affected, unvaried Palmyra. Her words were usually unclear as were those of most of the cast; that was no doubt the composer's fault or the orchestra's, but one would hardly have wished the LSO to play less sumptuously. The chorus, hardly looking like Negro slaves, were the only weakness in the staging.

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Daily Telegraph, May 18 1972. Camden Festival.

Excellent singing in Delius's 'Koanga'.

by Peter Stadlen.

Chance encounters with Eastern music have influenced Western composers at an earlier date than is sometimes assumed. With the young Delius it was a stay at his father's Florida plantation that gave rise to the opera "Koanga".

It was presented by the Delius Trust in association with the Camden Festival at Salder's Wells Theatre last night.

With the scene set in the 18th century, the theme of slavery is of course dealt with decently, though social protest hardly plays a more crucial role here than, say, in "Figaro".

Nor, presumably, would a composer today select for his hero the captive Prince from Cable's novel who, without giving a thought to collective resistance, refuses to share the lot of his fellow Africans and, moreover, temporarily prevails over his Christian oppressors with the help of Voodoo witchcraft.

What fascinated Delius was the prospect of utilising the Creole songs he learned from the emancipated slaves. But it must be said that in the light of our subsequent absorption of the Blues principle his treatment strikes one as rather foursquare.

In fact the period's characteristic quest for exoticism is successful only during the blackmagic rituals that open the third act.

This, otherwise is somewhat Tristanesque, in contrast to the pure Englishry in most of this remarkably well sustained score.

After the premiere in Germany in 1904, the opera was done by Beecham at Covent Garden in 1934, and revived two years ago in Washington with Claudia Lindsey and Eugene Holmes in the principal roles of Palmyra and Koanga.

On this occasion, too, these excellent Negro singers contributed much to the success of the production which included Gordon Wilcock's powerfully sung Overseer and Jean Allister's outstanding Clotilda.

The London Symphony Orchestra distinguished themselves under Charles Groves.

The Guardian, Thursday May 18th 1972.    Sadler's Wells.

### Koanga

by Edward Greenfield.

The Dance "La Calinda" contains what is probably the best known of all Delius's melodies, yet the opera from which it comes, "Koanga", has remained unstaged in this country ever since Sir Thomas Beecham gave it at Covent Garden in 1935. This week with the help of the Delius Trust, the Camden Festival presents it at Sadler's Wells Theatre in a production which will rightly delight Delians (and others) but which explains very clearly why it has so far failed to keep the stage.

This was the opera which Delius wrote in the first flood of his love affair with his wife-to-be, Jelka, not to mention his love affair with his home-to-be, Grez-sur-Loing. Paradoxically though the piece is set in the Deep South, where Delius had spent some of his early years, it was in the music of the first two acts, which he wrote in France, that the most evocative Southern atmosphere emerges. When he reached Florida to write the third act, he somehow managed to meander; he forgot to include the spirituals, which earlier are so haunting, and until the glorious epilogue rich in sunset tones, his lyricism lost much of its distinctive flavour.

The first two acts are different, compact and charming to make one forget the occasional dramatic stiffness, in fact almost to welcome it in that unashamedly Delius keeps launching into set numbers of a ravishing richness. The production of Douglas Craig did little to conceal the bareness of action (the choreography hindered rather than helped) but the designs of Peter Rice with their stylised cane-plantation background were evocative, and so for most of the time was the playing of the London Symphony Orchestra under Charles Groves.

It is good news that the opera is now going to be recorded, but plainly some changes will have to be made in the casting. The outstanding figure vocally is the negro singer Eugene Holmes as Koanga (he took the part in Washington in 1970), and once the voice focussed it was a magnificent baritone. His presence too is commanding. It was disappointing that his colleague from Washington, Claudia Lindsey as the mulatto heroine, Palmyra, did not match his achievement, with a voice that at its finest had the rich, smokey tones of a Leontyne Price, but disconcertingly kept falling into uneven tone. Gordon Wilcock as the whip-cracking overseer (strangely the tenor role) may have acted too much the English gentleman, but his top register was impressively firm. Some good singing too from Jean Allister as the wife of the planter. Two more performances this week - tomorrow and Saturday.

The Observer Review, 21 May 1972.

Voodoo on Delius.

by Stephen Walsh.

The last of the Camden Festival's four operatic productions was of Delius's Koanga, an early work not staged in London since Beecham did it at Covent Garden in 1935. Whole evenings of Delius may not be everyone's cup of tea. But at least the Delius Trust, whose presentation this was, rightly decided that if 'Koanga' was worth doing it was worth doing well. So they took Sadler's Wells Theatre, hired the LSO and Charles Groves, brought over two Negro singers from the recent Washington production, and generally made sure that the performance did the work justice.

All this was wise, for 'Koanga' is not a work which could be guaranteed to stand on its own feet. The victim of an absurd libretto about voodoo (or something distantly related), it shows with painful clarity how little Delius's fundamentally reflective gifts as a composer were suited to the theatre.

In fact the score is so deficient in such basics as dramatic contrast and the portrayal of character as to be virtually unproduceable. Douglas Craig did his best, but the result was inevitably slow-moving. The designer, Peter Rice, having more help from the evocative qualities of Delius's writing, was able to achieve more, though he was hampered by having to use a predominantly Caucasian chorus, whose chocolate coon make-up naturally heightened the Uncle Tom effect of the story.

Some lovely music, with plentiful flashes of the mature Delius, remained for us to relish, and it was superbly played by the orchestra and tolerably well sung, by Eugene Holmes and Jean Allister in particular. That Delius should have wasted his time - and a lot of good material - on so alien a medium is nevertheless strange and sad. 'Koanga' is a bad opera that demonstrates with some force how truly difficult it must be to write a good one.

The Sunday Times, May 21 1972.

Koanga

by Desmond Shawe-Taylor.

Meanwhile at Sadler's Wells the Delius Trust mounted for three performances an ambitious and popular revival of Koanga, with the two coloured American principals of the successful Washington production of 1970, the LSO and the Camden Festival Chorus under the assured direction of Charles Groves.

The opera, hampered by an absurdly stilted libretto, is early Delius and ineptly made; but its finest Pages, such as the Calinda dance-episode, the forest voodoo scene and the last orchestral interlude, exert a spell that comes straight out of the composer's Florida life and proves even stronger in the theatre than in the concert hall. In the title role Eugene Holmes made an African chieftain of imposing presence and voice. Sensible production by Douglas Craig in Peter Rice's evocative sets.

The Sunday Telegraph May 21, 1972.

Koanga

by John Warrack.

Not even Beecham was very enthusiastic about Delius's 'Koanga', which the Camden Festival revived at Sadler's Wells last week. Even with Eugene Holmes and Claudia Lindsey, the stars of the recent Washington performances, and with Charles Groves conducting the L.S.O., it made a somewhat halting effect. Most of the best music is in the choruses, often very pretty, in which Delius' imagination was clearly caught by the sounds he had heard on his Florida plantation.

The Stage and Television Today, May 25, 1972.

It seems slightly surprising that the Delius opera "Koanga" has not had a London showing since the middle thirties, when it was given its first and only presentation under Sir Thomas Beecham, because it seemed so worthwhile when it was given on May 17 at Sadler's Wells Theatre by the Delius Trust in association with the Camden Festival.

One of the greatest influences on Delius as a composer was the singing of the negroes on his orange plantation in Florida, where he spend a year of his youth. In subject and treatment "Koanga" gives evidence of this.

Set on a plantation on the Mississippi in Louisiana the opera tells the love story of a voodoo priest captured and sold into slavery with Palmyra, a beautiful half caste. At their wedding festivities she is abducted by the overseer, Simon Perez, where upon Koanga, having overpowered the master of the plantation flees into the forest where he invokes the curse of voodoo on his enemies. Unfortunately Palmyra, in a vision, is seen to be among the victims. Koanga returns in time to save her from the overseer but is pursued and slain. Palmyra offers the blood sacrifice and kills herself with her lover's dagger.

The leading parts offer great scope both musically and dramatically, and Claudia Lindsay and Eugene Holmes, who sang the parts last year in Washington, are quite exceptional. Miss Lindsey's utter involvement and fine voice communicated great excitement and Mr. Holmes has magnificent presence with voice to match. It is difficult to imagine anyone better.

The London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Charles Groves was making its first appearance in the pit of Sadler's Wells. The sound was wonderfully lush. - J.C.

New Statesman. 26 May, 1972.

Koanga, Sadler's Wells. Black King

by Wilfrid Mellers.

Between the late 19th century and the aftermath of the 1914-18 war the music of the American Negro swept across the 'civilised' Western world: which was perhaps initiating an act of self-immolation. Presumably the black man's music affected our white hearts so potently because his memories of 'the beauty of his wild forebears', of 'mythologies he cannot inherit, nostalgias of another life', awoke echoes within our divided and distracted souls. This being so, it's hardly surprising that Delius, composer of the twilight of Europe's post-Wagnerian gods, should have discovered that the Negro's music released something in and of himself; indeed that Delius as a young man, escaping the smog and grime of industrial Bradford, found himself in Florida - unsuccessfully growing oranges or grapefruit (accounts vary), but listening, open-eared, whilst the 'darkies' at the close of day indulged in ad hoc choral harmonisation - is one of those accidents that may be no accident at all. Certainly this music helped Delius to discover himself; and in two early works, *Appalachia* and *Koanga*, he used it directly as source material. Both pieces are important to his evolution, though the opera, currently revived at Sadler's Wells under the auspices of the Delius Trust hardly ranks as fully representative.

In relationship to his operatic masterpiece *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, *Koanga* occupies a position roughly parallel to Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* in relation to his *Tristan*. Both operas light on, and explore, the theme that was to be essential to the composer, without distilling its essence; and in both there's a division between the necessities of the myth and survivals of conventional operatic practices which the composers later discarded. In terms of 19th-century musical-theatrical craft *Koanga* is remarkably, and somewhat surprisingly professional; and its musical highlights are inseparable, as they should be, from its dramatic crises. The big ensemble at the end of the first act is grandly sustained, whilst *Koanga's* solo exit from the second act is scarcely less powerful; it's good to be reminded of the younger Delius's energy, since it's the latent energy that imbues his later recollection of passion in tranquillity with such intensity.

Significantly enough, in view of his later development, Delius presents *Koanga's* story in flash-back, as an old tale recounted. The disparity between the realities of the external, social world and the inner realities of passion is explicitly the theme: the love of *Koanga*, the Noble Savage, for *Palmyra*, the Half-Caste Beauty, is doomed by the very fact of the heroine's equivocation between two worlds; *Koanga's* black, 'unconscious' honesty to his emotional life is destroyed by the pretences of the whitely civilised world, while *Palmyra* destroys herself in returning to her ancestral gods. Basically Delian though the theme is, however, it comes out at this point in his career as stagey because incompletely realised in terms of his music. The third act's ultimate climax - the voodooistic rediscovery of the Caliban within us - is hardly more than an exercise in exotic romanticism; and it was to take Delius a few more years to realise that the Eden

he was seeking was within himself. The childhood, lost youth and instinctive passion of his Village Romeo and Juliet are submerged beneath the unknowable waters: destroyed by a corrupt society, maybe, but still more by the contagion inherent in fallen man's mortality, so mysteriously evoked, in those paradisial gardens, by the fiddling Dark Stranger. No longer is there a split between the real world and that of the imagination.

Compared with this, Koanga is 'theatrical' and 'effective' - impressively so, but in inverted commas. Significantly, it's only after the lovers are dead that the Delian magic obliterates both operatic convention and historical context; and an orchestral elegy melts the heart as innocently pentatonic melodies on solo oboe or cello float through the strings' dissolving chromatics. This was the point from which quint-essential Delius was to flower; and in later years he did not need the black man as symbol of the instinctual passion that Faustian, urban man had relinquished.

The performance at Sadler's Wells exploited the opera's virtues and to a degree over-rode its disabilities. The Negro principals looked and sounded fine, though they didn't and - given their European training - couldn't attain the appropriately black, Porgy-and-Bess-like vocal bloom. The white principals had easier, because more conventionally operatic, tasks and performed them well - especially Jean Allister as Clotilda. The orchestral playing hadn't the dark luminosity one listens for in Delius, but this was partly the composer's fault; except at the end, the authentic sonority is not fully realised because it's not yet fully experienced. There was no doubt about Charles Groves's sympathetic command of the score; his Village Romeo and Juliet should be worth waiting for.\* The production was pretty and the music-hall character of the dances is endemic to their music and the social set-up they represent. The voodoo ceremony, however, was coyly balletistic and - allied to some indifferent choral singing - did nothing for the music, at this point inadequate. As for the final Christian benediction on the dead lovers; I don't know whether it's specified in the score but can't believe it was sanctioned by Delius, even if by his librettist. It denies the opera's theme - and the entire life-work of Delius's maturity.

\*This is an evident mis-understanding: the new recording is, of course, conducted by Meredith Davies.

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#### The Mendlesohn Club of Philadelphia Concert 23.4.73

Mr. Marsh writes:-

"In addition to the "Songs of Farewell" we shall do the following three unaccompanied choruses: "To Be Sung of a Summer Night on the Water", "Mountain Silence" (On Craig Ddu), and "Midsummer Song". The English texts will be used in these and also for the "Songs of Farewell".

Ticket prices for the Academy of Music Concert will be \$4 and \$2. There will be an open seating policy, i.e., we will not attempt to have each seat numbered in this house which seats just under 3000. But rather areas will be indicated according to price. This is a much larger hall than we have been used to in recent seasons.

Final rehearsals with orchestra will be Saturday, April 21 from 1.30 - 4.00 and Monday (the concert date) from 4.00 - 6.30. Delius Society members can be admitted if they write to me in advance. Also I shall arrange for a reserved section so Society members can sit together and meet each other. There undoubtedly will be a party or reception following the concert to which Society members will be welcome. Usually a small fee is required to cover refreshments, etc. Details from me later. I don't have them at this point, but members may write to me in late March or early April. I will handle all ticket applications also."

Those interested should write to:-

Mr. William W. Marsh, Jr.  
1526 Pine Street,  
Philadelphia, Pa. 19102  
U. S. A.

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